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SUBJECT: STRIKE BY SECONDARY TEACHERS THREATENS TO TURN
INTO GENERAL STRIKE

¶1. (U) Summary. On November 5, the Israeli labor federation Histadrut threatened a general strike unless the Government enters into "sincere negotiations" with striking secondary teachers. The announcement came after a November 4 meeting between Histadrut chairman Ofer Eini, Education Minister Yuli Tamir, and Treasury officials failed to produce any breakthrough. The secondary teachers, who have been striking off and on since April, are seeking higher wages - the salary for new teachers falls below the poverty line -- as well as smaller and fewer classes. In a meeting with Embassy Labor Reporting Officer (LRO), secondary teachers' union head Ran Erez complained that the government was endangering the future of the country with corporate-like practices that had damaged the education system. An emotional Erez told LRO that he is "not prepared to stop" unless the Government meets their demands. The Labor Court met November 6, but did not issue a ruling ordering the teachers back to work. According to unconfirmed reports, Eini met with Tamir and Finance Minister Roni Bar-On November 7 and has agreed to act as mediator for the teachers' union. Some observers expressed optimism that an agreement will be reached by the end of the week. End Summary.

¶2. (U) Most secondary teachers in Israel have been striking off and on since April 2007 over low wages, large classes, and increased work loads. The elementary teachers' union settled their strike in 2006 for a 26% wage increase over five years, but that came with an increase in both class size and number of classes taught, according to Histadrut and secondary teachers union contacts. Members of a smaller secondary teachers' union, Hamorim, have accepted proposed changes to the educational system that the larger union has rejected, such as increased number and size of classes. (Hamorim is officially part of Histadrut, but is effectively independent from the labor federation, with headquarters separate from Histadrut's offices.) University professors and lecturers are also on strike, and many have joined protests in support of the secondary teachers, but their union has not officially joined forces with the secondary teachers.

LOW SALARIES AND INCREASED WORK LOADS

¶3. (U) Salaries for Israeli secondary teachers are extremely low. After obtaining a bachelor's degree, plus one year of teaching instruction, a new secondary teacher can expect a monthly salary of approximately \$700. Even with an additional government low-income supplement, the income for a new teacher falls under \$1,000 a month and below the poverty line. Most maids earn more than new secondary teachers, and many teachers, in fact, work as housekeepers (or other jobs) to supplement their income. Teaching salaries do increase with experience, but a teacher with twenty years' experience still earns less than \$2,000 a month. With a reported cost

of living in Tel Aviv higher than that in Rome, Vienna, Berlin or Los Angeles, these salaries do not provide an adequate standard of living.

14. (U) In addition, work conditions for secondary teachers have deteriorated. Erez reported that a typical class size is now 40-44 students "packed like sardines." Shorter classes -- designed to increase the number of students taught per teacher, according to Erez, as more classes are taught in the same number of hours -- result in each student receiving much less personal instruction than before. Erez said that the work loads prevent teachers from adequately meeting the needs of either advanced or challenged students, as all instruction must be "at the same level" because the number and size of classes did not allow for anything but the most basic preparation or appraisal of homework and exams.

PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES AND SOCIAL IMPACT

15. (U) Erez complained that the Government was running education like a corporation, and cited several examples of what he considered the consequences of that philosophy. He said the government was "worshipping the golden calf" of matriculation exams, teaching to tests rather than teaching the skills students will need to thrive in the future. Erez, noting that the Government spends approximately nine times as much per prisoner as it does per student, was using "fright tactics" (such as security concerns about Iran and Syria) to distract the public from the consequences of neglect of the educational system.

16. (U) Erez expressed great concern at what he described as the impact of GOI funding and policies for education. He described a rise in dropouts (now 30,000 per year, according

to Erez) with increasing frustration, vandalism, drug and alcohol abuse, bullying, and violence among teenagers. The union chief said that the number of new teachers entering the system annually had dropped from 6,000 five years ago to 4,000 today. And Erez reported that Israeli students, who he said had topped world rankings in math and science in the 1960's, now fell behind Iran at the International Academic Olympiad. He pointed to rising divisions between different sectors of Israeli society -- recent media reports have examined the growing "social gap" in Israeli society -- were in large part the result of problems in the educational system. Erez stressed that he was not only fighting for higher teacher salaries, but for educational reform. He said nothing less than the quality of life in Israel -- and the future welfare of the country -- was at stake.

PROSPECTS OF A NATIONAL STRIKE

17. (U) The Histadrut contact thought it unlikely that the labor federation would actually call a general strike, but did not rule out the possibility. Even if Eini is simply "flexing his muscles" -- as some have suggested -- the teachers' union seems intent on holding its ground. And with the Government concerned with "opening the floodgates" if they reach a more generous deal with the teachers -- the postal workers, for example, are also threatening a work stoppage -- the possibility of a nation-wide strike should not be dismissed. Some government authorities reportedly are holding out hope that the Labor Court will order the striking teachers back to work, but the Court issued no ruling after a November 6 meeting. Eini reportedly met with Tamir and Finance Minister Roni Bar-On November 7 and agreed to act as mediator for the teachers, but that has not been confirmed. Press reports said that Eini accused the Finance Ministry of trying to sabotage an agreement reached between the Education Ministry and the teachers' union that would have raised the teachers' salaries by 37 percent. Nevertheless, some sources have expressed optimism that Eini will be able to forge a

deal by the end of the week.

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JONES